

Emotions and Equanimity

San Rafael Sitting Group

December 7, 2011

Last week Rick taught so eloquently about emptiness, about the impermanence and the effemerality of material existence, of all existence – all things, all phenomena, all processes, all energies. That insubstantiality is the nature of existence, and that suffering comes from trying to cling or grasp what is ungraspable. We spin ourselves into a frenzy or tightly contract trying to hold on to something that can't be held onto, our own lives or the lives of people important to us, our own creations or the creations of others important to us. And that we can let go of that contraction, that spinning, that suffering when we let go of the clinging, the grasping. Letting things be, letting them dissolve into the emptiness, the spaciousness really, of the next moment, and the next moment, and the next.

I went home from last week's sitting group a bit stirred up. It seems to me that letting go of suffering, by letting go of grasping and clinging, isn't the whole story. The Buddha taught as well about opening our consciousness to the inter-connectedness of all things, the embracing of the miraculousness of life. Rick mentioned, too, that every moment comes about from 10,000 causes upstream, the teaching of co-dependent origination, that stuff has no substance intrinsic to itself, but that all stuff arises out of the inter-dependent inter-connection of all being. What Thich Nhat Hanh calls inter-being.

It occurs to me that the realization of this inter-connectedness, this embodied experience that we, ever-changing, ever-unfolding, are part of all that is, is also what we practice for, and study for. An experience of non-dual awareness, that there is no separation between ourselves and any other phenomena of being.

Many of you know I'm a psychotherapist and that I work with trauma, especially attachment trauma that comes from wounding in relationships. And certainly the point of healing from trauma, healing from suffering, is to be more than a survivor. It's to thrive. It's to be able to live a fully vital, authentic, engaged, loving and wise, compassionate and connected life.

Some of you know Eugene Cash, a senior teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center; some of you know Eugene was in a very serious bicycle accident September 24 of this year. Multiple injuries; traumatic brain injury; Eugene is home from the hospital; there is now an estimated recovery time of 8 -18 months, which is considered miraculous. Eugene's family and friends have posted a blog through Caring Bridge (you can access it through a link on the Spirit Rock home page). The almost daily posts from Eugene's wife, Pam Weiss, and good friend Frank Ostaseski, founder of the Zen Hospice Project, speak over and over and over again of the generous outpouring of love and support from friends, sangha members, the larger community since the accident.

Eugene's wife posted this on Thanksgiving Eve: "As Thanksgiving approaches, it occurs to me that gratitude comes in myriad forms and textures, but the heart of it is this: not taking anyone or anything for granted; knowing it can all change in a heartbeat; feeling the breath of

undeniable loss as inspiration; remembering to be amazed each morning when we open our eyes; and doing our best to keep our eyes wide open as we move through the day. No ground; all gift. So much something arising out of nothing at all.”

I found myself thinking last week, the spaciousness and freedom that comes from letting go is a great gift of practice, a true liberation. AND the love and awareness that comes from recognizing our intrinsic connection in the web of all being, is a great gift of practice, too.

I remembered the teaching of Sri Nisargadatta, the modern Indian sage: *Love teaches me I am everything; wisdom teaches me I am nothing. Between the two my life flows.*

It's this flow, between the wisdom of the no-thing-ness that Rick was pointing to last week, and the love we experience in the oneness, the inter-connectedness, that is as much a pillar of Buddhist teaching, that I want to talk about this evening.

At one point in the Q & A last week, Rick used the phrase emotions and equanimity. What helps us navigate this flow a lot is equanimity. Because it is equanimity – the ability to see without being caught by what we see; a calm presence that is aware, open, engaged but not swayed or caught by any phenomena, any experience of the moment, a capacity that Phil Moffett, another Spirit Rock teacher, calls, “being affected without being infected.” – that can hold our experiences of no-thing-ness and our experiences of inter-connectedness in a balance, without reifying either one, without forgetting the other. Without turning either one into something concrete to grasp onto, or something dropped off the radar, neglected or forgotten.

Gil Fronsdal, one of Spirit Rock's senior teachers, describes equanimity this way. “Equanimity is the ground for wisdom and freedom and the protector of compassion and love. While some may think of equanimity as dry neutrality or cool aloofness, mature equanimity produces a radiance and warmth of being. The Buddha described a mind filled with equanimity as “abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will.” When well-developed, such inner calm gives rise to a great sense of peace.”

So how do we cultivate equanimity? The first teaching, this is Pema Chodron's languaging, is to catch ourselves when we feel any attraction or any aversion about anything before it hardens in grasping or negativity. We use our mindfulness practice for that, to notice the first arising if any reaction, liking or disliking, wanting or not wanting, letting go of any reactivity to any of our reactions.

There are also supports for cultivating equanimity:

- 1) We cultivate equanimity through the wisdom of seeing clearly the emptiness and impermanence of all experience, whatever is happening now wasn't happening ten minutes ago or three days ago. This state of being or state of consciousness will evolve to something different ten minutes from now, and trusting that seeing of the ever-changing nature of experience.

2) We cultivate equanimity through a mindful and compassionate acceptance of the experience of the moment as is, not grasping, not avoiding, not denying; accepting the experience and the reality that the experience is changing.

3) We cultivate equanimity by cleaning up our act, by cultivating virtue and integrity in all our behaviors and interactions, experience equanimity of blamelessness.

4) We cultivate equanimity by understanding that each of us, every person, is responsible for our own decisions that lead to happiness or led to suffering. One of the phrases used in equanimity practice that I have found so helpful: your happiness or unhappiness is the result of your actions, not my wishes for you. Each of us is responsible for our own practices to end suffering, our own wise effort. We care, and care deeply; we can reflect and remind and guide; we can be one of the 10,000 causes upstream in someone's choices. We can be responsive: may your meet the ups and downs of your life with calmness, peacefulness, resilience. But we're not responsible.

5) We cultivate equanimity by pro-actively cultivating a sense of well-being. Gil also teaches: we do not need to leave the well-being that supports equanimity to chance. In Buddhism, it is considered appropriate and helpful to cultivate and enhance our well-being. The step of Wise Effort in the 8-fold path, or, as Rick teaches, taking in the good.

All of which brings me to emotions and equanimity. We are hardwired to feel our own emotions, and we are hardwired to resonate, attune to, empathize with the emotions of other people. Emotions are signals, sometimes from our body, sometimes from our mid-brain, sometimes from our higher brain: "Something important is happening. Pay attention!" And so when we do pay attention, we notice, we focus, and we bring mindful awareness and a compassionate acceptance to what is happening in this moment. Then we can be non-reactive to our reactions. When we can simply be with and be accepting of our emotions, they will change on their own, naturally. The average emotion lasts eight seconds if we don't grip it or feed it. Emotions give us moment by moment practice in equanimity: being with, without reacting, without losing our cool. So – an emotion, a reaction, arises. We evoke a mindful pause. We notice, experience, hold, reflect, take responsibility for our emotions, manage them, process them, respond to them wisely and skillfully.

There are so many emotional roller coasters to ride in a situation like Eugene's accident and recovery, as you can imagine: shock, horror, grief, hope, despair, love, gratitude, amazement. Eugene's motto on his blog is "Everything is practice." So – an emotion, a reaction, arises. We evoke a mindful pause. We notice, experience, hold, reflect, take responsibility for our emotions, manage them, process them, respond to them wisely and skillfully.

6) We cultivate equanimity by differentiating our emotional experience of the moment from the emotional experiences of the moment of other people. We are inter-connected, we reverberate with people, but differentiated, what Phillip Moffitt calls we're affected, but not infected.

When we practice equanimity, we are primed already to be in an equanimous state. We notice, contain, be with and work with our own emotions; we expect and require other people to notice, contain, be with and work with their own emotions. With enough awareness and working with and honoring the emotions as signals for the need for wise action, wise behaviors, then the emotions flowing back and forth between us and another person can be noticed and held and observed and honored and responded to mindfully and skillfully. Can be held in equanimity, engaged but not swayed, affected but not infected and in fact can be a gateway to our common humanity, our common vulnerability, our common vitality, our inter-connectedness.

Exercise: When you've had a moment of noticing your own reactivity and holding it mindfully, compassionately, how does that help engender a sense of connection with other people, the inter-connectedness. Or, when you notice someone else' reactivity, just noticing, being with, working with equanimously, how does that keep the sense of connection, inter-connectedness, open?

Q&A

End: Tara Brach: May all beings heal and awaken into the love and awareness that holds and honors the fullness of being.